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12 January 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Secretary Laird's 6 January Memorandum Entitled
"Improvement of Indigenous Forces in Laos"

1. Secretary Laird's 6 January Laos memorandum is, overall, a rather confused and somewhat confusing document. In part, the confusion derives from the fact that the memorandum's argument and position are not very well thought out or clearly expressed. It also derives from the fact that, typically, Laird is trying simultaneously to work both sides of several streets, some of which crisscross.

2. His opening paragraph is proforma and can really be ignored. All he is trying to do there is get onto the record that the Defense Department has provided all the support anyone could have (or has) asked for since the NVA offensive began on 17 December. Its object is simple skirt cleaning.

3. The second paragraph stumbles on an unrecognized, at least unacknowledged, dilemma. Lao capabilities, in point of fact, are a direct function of U.S. involvement. Hence it is sheer nonsense to speak of increasing the former while decreasing the latter. No one would argue against the ultimate goal of reduced U.S. costs and reduced hostilities any more than anyone would argue against motherhood or virtue. Hostilities in Laos, however, are unlikely to be materially reduced unless or until there is some form of settlement throughout Indochina, or North Vietnam, for whatever reasons, stops employing armed force as a principal method of achieving its political objectives. This point is obliquely nodded to in the opening clause of Laird's third paragraph.

4. The root problem, on which Laird's memorandum ostriches, comes up in that third paragraph: the fact that indigenous Lao forces -- of whatever stripe -- simply cannot cope with the North Vietnamese Army. Thus, it is unrealistic to believe that we can frame an assistance program, especially one whose run significantly below present aid levels, that will enable the Lao to accomplish the manifestly impossible. The argument about programs fragmented according to categories of forces and the reference to minimal quantities of long-term investment, incidentally, echo the thoughts of (if they were not, in fact, drafted by) General Stilwell.

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5. Secretary Laird is wrong in suggesting that we have ever had serious interest in holding the territory beyond the Mekong Valley. The Plain of Jars, specifically, was never taken with a view to permanent retention while the Indochina War was in progress. The object of positioning friendly forces thereon during the past two wet seasons has always been that of making the North Vietnamese chew up assets and dry season time in retaking it so they would not be able, in any given campaign year, to mount a serious military threat against Sala Phou Koun or the Vientiane Plain. Our whole idea, indeed, has been precisely that of trying to keep the fighting in the hills well away from the Mekong Valley -- exactly the objective Laird is advocating. Thus, the restructuring of strategy argument completely misses the point of what we have actually been trying to do for the past several years.

6. Laird makes two points in the remainder of his analysis that are both valid and unarguable:

(a) The level of U.S. support cannot increase (because of Congressional and political factors).

(b) We must try to develop longer term programs that will call for progressively diminishing degrees of U.S. involvement.

7. I would argue that achieving the above performance entails increasing someone else's involvement, which means -- in practical terms -- that of the Thais. The Pathet Lao alone are a problem that friendly Lao forces, even as presently structured, can cope with fairly handily. They cannot, as noted above, cope with the Pathet Lao's external supporters, the North Vietnamese Army, who constitute the real threat. These external Communist forces, if they are to be contained in the near to medium term future, will have to be countered with external friendly forces -- i.e., the Thai (and, possibly, some South Vietnamese in south Laos). America's real political problem is that of persuading the potentially viable and (by local standards) powerful Indochinese states of Thailand and South Vietnam to assume regional defense responsibilities now borne by the U.S. It is on this task that our longer term efforts should be focused, not the impossible one in trying to develop an army capable of containing the NVA in a non-country whose generals are unlikely, in this generation, to be much but local warlords.

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cc: Messrs. Colby
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